

Brief Review:
The Old West
The Miners
Time/Life Books

Photo Research:
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World Museum of Mining
Butte, Montana

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MINER'S DRILLING CONTEST

by

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Bronze 5" x 12" x 9"

DRILLING CONTESTS were the main events in Fourth of July celebrations in many mining towns, even after mechanical drills came into use. The stone ordinarily used was Gunnison granite, cut into a block at least six feet thick with upper surface dressed flat. While a timekeeper stood by, the miners pounded away at their steels for exactly 15 minutes. The world's record for the "straitaway" (two men, but no change of position) was set in Busbee, Arizona, on July 4, 1903 by a Cornishman named Sell Tarr, who drilled $28\frac{5}{8}$ inches. In a double-jacking event that same day in El Paso, Texas, with both men taking turns on the sledge, the team of Chamberlain and Make sank a hole $42\frac{1}{2}$ inches deep - another record.

Such trials could bring disaster as well as glory. In Nevada a miners wife, Mrs. Hugh Brown, left this account of an accident-marred contest: "A drilling contest has everything: technique, beauty, endurance, speed and danger. If the hammer descends a fraction of an inch out of line on the tiny head of the drill, a man's hand may be crushed.

"During my life in Tonopah I saw a man's hand struck. Suddenly the hammer poised in midair. The crowd groaned, knowing what had happened. After an instant flinch, the man crouched over the drill looked up at his towering partner and yelled, 'come down, you!' Down came the hammer. The men cheered and the women cried. The hand on the drill began to turn red, but still it held on to the drill. When the injured man's turn came to rise and hold the hammer, the blood crept down his arm until it looked as though it had been thrust into a pot of red paint. The blood ran into the hole and mixed with water from the hose used to flush out the drill cuttings. Every time the hammer descended, the red fluid sloshed up and splattered nearby onlookers. The man sagged lower after every blow, but he never gave up until the timer's hand signalled fifteen minutes. Then he fell over in a dead faint. The platform looked like a slaughtering block."